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ABSTRACT

A thematic approach used to teach Chinese to third-grade Chinese-American children is described and illustrated with photographs and student art. The unit discussed focused on the moon, and was scheduled to coincide with the Chinese Moon Festival. Language related to the moon was taught by introducing vocabulary and Chinese characters with a moon radical, guessing riddles about the moon and about Chinese characters related to the moon/month, engaging in art activities related to the moon, describing of festivals related to the lunar calendar, and teaching scientific content about the moon through games. It is concluded that the unit provided a holistic, natural approach to teaching language through culture, art, and science, and gave the students comprehensible input in meaningful contexts. (MSE)

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ED 435 176

A THEMATIC UNIT ON 'MOON' IN A THIRD-GRADE CHINESE LANGUAGE CLASS

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1. Introduction

In order to acquire language effectively, learners need a rich acquisition environment in which they are receiving appropriate comprehensible input (Krashen, 1984). Hence, a language teacher's primary responsibility is to create the necessary conditions for acquisition to take place (Terrell, 1984). One of the conditions is to use the same language in varying contexts. Such language repetition can be accomplished through a thematic approach (Brechtel, 1992). For instance, a thematic unit on color (Hsu, 1994) enables students to acquire language related to color in a variety of contexts. The students can draw pictures using various color media, or they can perform a science experiment using primary colors to produce secondary colors. In these activities, acquisition of language surrounding the color theme occurs naturally. A thematic unit is particularly useful for elementary school children to acquire language taught in a natural approach (Terrell, 1984).

This paper presents a field study of a thematic approach to teaching a third-grade language class in which Chinese-American children met two hours each week to learn Chinese as their heritage language (see Figures 1 and 2).

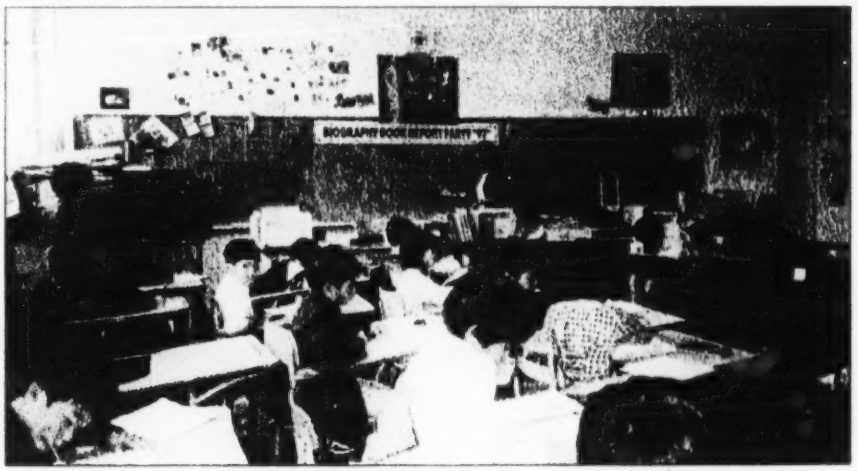

Figure 1. Teacher Introducing Vocabulary

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Figure 2. Students Practicing Character Writing

Class sessions were videotaped for analysis. It was observed that in addition to teaching lessons in the textbooks, the teacher often chose a related topic or object as a theme and engaged the students in activities that centered around the theme. This paper focuses on a thematic unit on *yueliang* 'moon'. This was particularly pertinent to the time of the year, which was around the 15th day of the eighth month in the lunar calendar (called the Moon Festival or Mid-Autumn Festival). The paper shows how the teacher taught language related to the moon through the following activities:

- Introducing vocabulary related to the moon;
- Introducing Chinese characters with a moon radical;
- Guessing riddles about the moon and about Chinese characters related to the moon/month;
- Illustrating/drawing activities related to the moon;
- Describing festivals related to the lunar calendar (which is based on the movement of the moon);
- Relating stories about the moon and Moon Festival; and
- Teaching (scientific) facts about the moon through games.

2. Vocabulary

The teacher first introduced the following words related to *yue* 'moon':

- *yueliang* 'moon'
- *yueqiu* '(the planet) moon'
- *yueguang* 'moonlight'
- *yuebing* 'moon cake'
- *yueli* 'lunar calendar'
- *mingyue* 'bright moon'
- *shi'eryue* 'December (twelfth month)'

3. Character Writing

The teacher then showed the students how to write the character *yue* (月). She also introduced several characters that consist of *yue* (月) as a radical, among which was the character *fu* (服), which consists of *yue* (月) on the left. She then gave the following examples of words and phrases using this character:

- 月 *yue* 'moon' (as a left radical)
- 服 *fu* (See collocations below.)
- 服裝 *fuzhuang* 'costume'
- 服務 *fuwu* 'service'
- 服氣 *fuqi* 'submit willingly'
- 衣服 *yifu* 'clothes'
- 口服藥 *koufuyao* 'pill'

4. Riddles

The teacher presented some riddles related to the moon and the character *yue* (月) to arouse students' interest and stimulate their imagination and analytic skill, as exemplified below:

- 月半最胖（月+半=胖）
  The characters 月 'moon/month' and 半 'half/in the middle of' make up the character 胖 'fat'. That is, the moon is fattest in the middle of the month.
- 十二月（十+二+月=青）
  The characters 十 'ten', 二 'two', and 月 'moon/month' make up the character 青 'blue/green'.

5. Drawings with Annotations

As part of their homework assignment, students drew four pictures of phenomena related to the moon and provided annotation for each picture, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

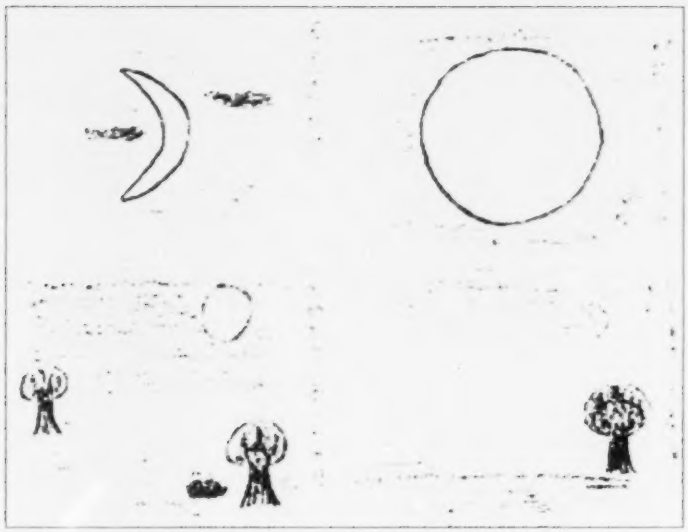

Figure 3.
The moon is white. It is round during the Mid-Autumn Festival.
We enjoy the moon under the moonlight.
The moon rests during the day.

Figure 4.
The moon is covered by black clouds.
We cannot see the moon today (because of the eclipse).
The moon is big and round every 15th day of the month in the lunar calendar.
It is said that a person and a rabbit live on the moon.

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6. Festivals Related to the Lunar Calendar

The teacher stated that the lunar calendar is based on the movement of the moon. It is used by the Chinese people to observe Chinese traditional holidays such as follows:

- Lantern Festival, which occurs on the 15th day of the first month. This day marks the end of the Chinese New Year celebration. The Chinese people celebrate this day by displaying all kinds of lanterns, guessing riddles, and eating glutinous rice dumplings.
- Moon Festival (Mid-Autumn Festival), which occurs on the 15th day of the eighth month. This is a day of family reunion. Family members gather under the moonlight to eat moon cakes and tell stories.

7. Stories

The teacher also told the class two stories from Chinese mythology related to the moon and Moon Festival:

- *Chang'e*, a beautiful lady who ascended to the moon after taking her husband's elixir.
- *Wu Gang*, a legendary figure who is still chopping a magical cassia tree on the moon.

8. Science

The class played a game of facts about *yueliang* 'moon' vs. *taiyang* 'sun'. The teacher asked the students to answer whether the following statements apply to the moon or to the sun:

- It is farther away from the earth. (sun)
- It shines on its own. (sun)
- It revolves around the earth. (moon)
- It appears to change its shape. (moon)
- It is on which the Mid-Autumn Festival is based. (moon)
- People can land on it. (moon)
- The earth revolves around it. (sun)
- It does not appear during the day. (moon)
- People can jump farther on its surface. (moon)

9. Conclusion

The above thematic unit on 'moon' provided a holistic, natural approach to teaching language through culture, art, and science. It gave the students the right kind of comprehensible input in meaningful contexts so that the language acquisition process was maximized.

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